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What's a Communist?

By William Buckley, Jr.



I JUST don't know what 'Communist' means today, precisely for the reason that there are so many varieties of it," Prof. George Kennan told the Fulbright Committee.

What the CIA has been recently exposed as having done was much more extensively exposed by the New York Times about a year ago. But even a year ago, reasons Walter Lippman, the public was still bewitched by the iron antagonisms of the postwar period, and could not be aroused in opposition to an agency of the West

in the cold war. Since then, says Mr. Lippmann, we have grown into the maturity which calmed Europe in the early '60s. We have come to realize that there is no cold war going on of any consequence.

And here and there you hear voices from the right; or, to be more specific, from the Republican Party, saying what could easily evolve into exactly the same thing. Sen. Charles Percy favors the consular treaty with the Soviet Union, favors an increase in trade with the Soviet Union.

And Richard Nixon is known to be apprehensive about the American people's attitude toward the Vietnam war in 1968 if by that time we have not made great headway. The opinion of our international detractors to the contrary notwithstanding, there isn't a drop of colonialism in our bloodstream, so that if the public understanding of the Vietnam engagement as related to our global anti-communist commitments should ever falter, support for that engagement would collapse overnight.

Well, who is right? It matters to distinguish between a position which is intellectually definable, even captivating; and a position-change of such force as to affect foreign policy. Mr. Kennan's remark, pasted on the bulletin board of institutes for advanced study, is altogether fitting.

"I just don't know what 'Capitalist' means today precisely, for

the reason that there are so many varieties of it" is a sign which with equal assurance might be posted on those bulletin boards in the Soviet Union that permit discursive thought — and the bewilderment would be as close to the mark as its complement at Princeton.

But what is the bearing of Mr. Kennan's insight on U.S. foreign policy? Even if we grant that Albanians believe that Muscovites make poor Leninists nowadays, and Maoists and non-Maoists scream their heads off at each other about the impurity of each other's ideological credentials — what in fact is the situation at important points of tension between east and west? Vietnam most conspicuously?

The Viet Cong there are not communists, it is said: merely indigenous revolutionists. Perhaps. But in fact "Viet Cong" is a contraction of "Vietnam Con San," the translation of which is "Vietnamese Communists." And in fact, whether you believe in the Russian brand of communism or, the Chinese brand or the Vietnamese brand, the three of them together provide 100 per cent of the facilities that makes possible the flow of materiel to the South to sustain the war of the Vietcong Communists, call them what you like.

And when one is overly influenced by theoretical postulates, while wrestling with realities in concrete situations, one ends up with such schizophrenic exposures as President Johnson's. There isn't a more adamant man alive on the subject of continuing the bombing of North Vietnam until the North Vietnamese promise to stop sending equipment down to the revolutionaries in the South.

At precisely the moment that he is inveighing on the subject, he attempts to persuade Congress back home to ease trade restrictions with the Soviet Union. But the Soviet Union is supplying over 50 per cent of the goods that go to North Vietnam for use in killing U.S. soldiers and free Vietnamese. So that Mr. Johnson is with one hand engaged in trying to bolster the economy of the principal supplier of a country, and with his other hand engaged in blowing to smithereens those supplies after they have arrived.